DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 335 CS 203 841

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TITLE	Pantomime as the Means and the End.
PUB DATE	Nov 77
NOTE	10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (67th, New York City, November 24-26, 1977)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Class Activities; *Creative Expression; Elementary Secondary Education; *Language Arts; *Learning Activities; Nonverbal Communication; *Pantomime; Speech Communication; Teaching Techniques; *Visual Learning

ABSTRACT

Pantomime can be used in language arts classes as a learning activity in which students observe and organize movements in a logical sequence, transforming abstract concepts into vivid images. This paper suggests three ways that teachers can use pantomime in the classroom: portraying character types, such as golfer, archer, or juggler; becoming "mirrors"--students pair off, face each other, and take turns as "leaders" and "reflectors"; and selecting vivid, descriptive passages that one student mimes as another student reads. When preparing students for pantomime, teachers should emphasize the necessity of moving slowly in full view of the audience and of exaggerating body movements and facial expressions. (RL)

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Pantomime as the Means and the End

> Mime Scene: Battling a bitter winter wind, a stooped, huddled figure trudges beside a road. Hearing an approaching motorist, the hitchhiker turns and hangs out a mittened thumb. No luck. Three attempts to obtain a ride fail, and the cold increases the hitchhiker's desperation. Hearing the sound of a fourth car in the distance, an idea comes to mind.
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> When the motorist approaches, he sees a hatless girl smiling flirtatiously. One unmittened hand beckons for a lift. The other hold the coat open to reveal a stretch of thigh. The car stops, and the lady flashes a victory smile before stepping into the auto.

Whether this scene is meant to teach women how to obtain a ride in cold weather or the adage "honey attracts more bees than vinegar", the audience receives a definite message from pantomime. This is the advantage of visual learning. Where one may need to explain what has been read or heard, we all know what we have seen with our own eyes. The Little League batter who has just struck out at a game's crucial point finds slamming his bat down on the ground more eloquent than any word. We perceive that a person walking in front of us is dejected merely by observing his drooped, hunched shoulders, arms hanging limply at his sides and his dragging gait. The driver of the above mime scene

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may be imaginary, but we all know the meaning of a fisted hand with jerked thumb or a look of invitation--whether it is given on the roadside or on one of Rogers' and Hammerstein's enchanted evenings. Because this sixth sense of interpreting emotions, thoughts and complete messages without the use of words is so inherent to us, it is disregarded as a vital instructional medium. After all, why teach what everyone already knows? Early childhood teachers, however, have long utilized pantomime activities to harness young children's intense physical responsiveness and lack of inhibitions as a means of strengthening motor ability, imagination and concept development. Acting out animals, situations and types of people, moving to music and miming sections of a story are a few means by which children learn structured movement and give order to their environment.

Why don't secondary instructors build on that foundation to nurture observation and personal interpretation? Instead, mime instruction is relegated to the drama coach who comprehends, only as he stands over the inert body of an aspiring actor, that Two-ton Teddy did not understand how to merely feign knocking out the play's villain. In the classroom, older students are given verbal situations to improvise or role play. The result expected is entertaining dialogue moving fluidly to a neat conclusion, but the teacher is treated to children standing silent and still as if their parents had a movie camera riveted on them. The disheartened instructor who is ready to obliterate all traces of drama from his classroom because his students seemingly lack ability to move and speak simultaneously (except when in their seats) needs simply to observe his own response to failure: pounding his fists on the chalkboard. Movement is innate to all of us.

Pantomime--or mime--is the use of body movement and facial expression to depict wordlessly an activity, an idea, a story or the meaning of a word. Superficially, mime is an easy classroom activity. We live learning and interpreting coded movements: the erect index finger held against pursed lips requesting silence; hands wringing nervously; the teacher's look of disapproval reprimanding the student's look of ennui. Therefore, students can readily respond with a correct answer as familiar as conveying impatience. While mime benefits all students regardless of age or ability, this appearance of facility is one reason why mime can uniquely stimulate the development of specific skills in those children deemed slow or reluctant learners.

Ask an eighth grader to pantomime the circus knife-thrower. Even if he has not read about him, he can draw on personal or vicarious experiences for vivid portrayal. A guest will not realize the actor is hyperkinetic and has a brief attention span. Mime scenes are as brief as the actor wishes and movement is mime! You will not hear the stuttering, vague answer of a child who has low verbal fluency and so shrugs his shoulders in pseudo-apathetic ignorance rather than admit he cannot adequately express his thoughts. You will not even see the bitter self-consciousness of one who perceives his ignorance and inferiority to the "brains" of the school. Pantomime supersedes the rigidity of a right answer and a wrong answer and focuses rather on the personal interpretation of a situation. An actor's limit is only his imagination. The audience may just see a person throwing a knife. More likely, they will see the precision of one who selects and draws a dagger, tests its sharpness by facetiously splitting a hair, aims with professional concentration,

throws with arrogant certainty, then looks on in mock horror when he misses--in order to have the last laugh on his classmates, shock the teacher, and thereby be "cool". You asked to see a knife-thrower. You saw instead a story with a purposely-planned, wryly humorous O. Henry conclusion although the actor has probably not even heard of O. Henry. And you thought the kid was slow!

Asked to portray a thief, a student begins a selective process. Where will the crime take place--in a store, a house or on the street? How will he make his entry--through a window or by jimmying a door? What will he take to make the pantomime interesting to the audience? Should he carry a sack? Will he trip over furniture? be frightened by a dog? How will the scene end--with a capture or escape? By answering these questions, the learner has--even if unconsciously--loosely structured a story with the author's consideration of what may arouse audience interest. Since personal interpretation is intrinsic to all drama, the student should feel free to add dimension to his performance. One person may mime drinking, and another may mime drinking, showing puzzlement and turning into a scratching, jumping monkey. It makes no difference that the audience has seen this ending before. Adding the unexpected twist at the proper time to even momentarily surprise an audience, and having oneself move in a way not attempted before makes the activity imaginative. The student who merely mimed drinking is not less of an actor, but he will be motivated to think of new actions to add flourish.

Pantomime challenges a student to observe even simple motions in order to realistically portray them. We enter doorways numerous times, but what is the exact body position as the door is opened? What hand

gesture turns a non-existent knob? What arm movement thrusts the door away? Will the door swing freely or jam?

A student learns to logically sequence movements. The thief must pantomime pulling out a tool, jimmying a window and raising it before he can enter a house. The person pantomiming Snow White's wicked step-mother practices the royal movements of the fairest woman in the world as she walks to her mirror. How does she smile as she recites her famous question? What expressions contort her face when the impudent mirror shatters the world's former beauty? By allowing a student to concentrate on movement and facial expression, the pressure of creating spontaneous monologue has been eliminated. After a student conceives how a character looks and feels at a particular moment in a story, then can she empathize with her enough to add meaningful speech. Using fairy tales, myths or types of people learners are familiar with, we construct an acting experience inductively teaching character analysis and motivation. The student imagines suitable movements and expressions and observes the quality of his imitations in relation to the standards set by his own mental conception. He has learned to cull knowledge, sequence information and measure his own success.

Description in a story, so often looked upon as dull and meaningless words purposely injected by an author to torture readers and prolong assignments, becomes data to be read for the purpose of pantomime interpretation. The significance of one word's definition takes on added dimension, too. A student may learn the word <u>swagger</u> for a vocabulary test. Then three days later, he neither remembers the definition nor recognizes the term! If the class had said aloud "swagger" and watched

one or two classmates arrogantly strut across the room, they would have seen what the word means. The use of pantomime has brought abstraction down to a concrete, tangible level. The importance of correct definition becomes consequential in forming a mental image for future reference or for accurately portraying character description.

Three pantomime activities are described in this article. They seem most successful in developing the skills outlined previously. Students can redo each frequently, adding new dimensions without repetition. They are also versatile because they are easily adapted to students of any age. Each exercise can be easily incorporated into other areas of the curriculum.

Be - Given a list of types of people, each student selects one type to pantomime. Students are free to simply depict the action each character suggests. The emphasis, however, is not solely on showing an activity. Students should infuse personality into their character portrayal, and they will if given encouragement for free expression by the instructor. The shoe salesman should deal with a customer needing Odor-Eaters and trying on ten pairs of shoes without buying any; the fisherman gets a big one on the line and is pulled into the water rather than pulling the fish out of it; the pickpocket successfully robs two people and then is robbed himself--perhaps by one of his own victims. Be may be expanded by allowing two or more students to create a story based on a character or by doing mimes intended for two or more people in the suggested types. Characters from literary selections may be added to the following list: fisherman; skier; golfer; swimmer; archer (William Tell?); jogger; bowler; fencer; ping pong player; basketball player; judo or karate expert; big game hunter; boxer; lion-tamer; juggler; flame-eater;

clown; tightrope walker; magician; photograph; carpenter; traffic cop; pizza chef; supermarket cashier; seamstress; model; wine taster; typist; bricklayer; housepainter; telephone operator; gast station attendant; musician; artist; cook; woodcutter; champion weight-lifter; Frankenstein; robot; bored student; hitchhiker; Charlie Chaplin; moving toy (doll, clown, jack-in-the-box); child building a sandcastle; person blowing up an immense balloon; floor lamp; cat; monkey. Be for two or more: Enact the umpire, pitcher and catcher in a close major league game. Walk a large dog. Fly a kite on a windy day. (One person is the kite and one is the dog in these two exercises.) A mad scientist concocts a potion which turns an unsuspecting guest into a monkey. A barber is giving a nervous customer a shave. Two gunslingers duel to the finish in the Old West. Enact a scene from a fairytale. Two people are a ball bouncing at varying tempos. Three people play jumprope. A cat stalks a bird. One person is the punching bag and the other is the puncher.

The mimes for two or more people require some planning time. Learners should not plot out every detail of their scene, so that they will be able to improvise as they act. They will devise a beginning and possibly an end. Some scenes may require loose outlining of sequence.

Mirrors - In this popular activity, students pair off and face one another. Each person takes a turn at being the leader and the reflector. The reflector attempts to mimic the leader's movements. Mirrors encourages the use of clearly defined motions rather than sloppy gesturing. Movement will also be slowed to a comprehensible rate as pairs attempt to synchronize motions. Suggestions for movements are: combing one's hair; putting on a necktie; drawing guns in an Old West duel; brushing teeth; inserting contact lenses; shaving; shadow boxing; doing judo or karate in slow motion; being puppets; practicing a tennis serve or a baseball

pitch; trying on a coat. Characters from Be may be incorporated into this activity, also.

Interpretation - Make a habit of selecting vivid descriptive passages from all literature forms your classes study. Have one volunteer dramatically read the passage as another volunteer mimes it. Later, as the entire class becomes proficient at pantomime, allow all students to interpret published and original works in this vocal/physical manner. A more intricate addition is to allow students to provide original background music or to play taped sounds. Students will learn to synchronize action with sound; to time themselves; to emphasize major ideas. Some poems that are easily interpreted are: Edwin A. Hoey's "Foul Shot"; "Casey at the Bat" by Ernest Lawrence Thayer; "The Creation" by James Weldon Johnson; "Base Stealer" by Robert Francis; "About the Teeth of Sharks" by John Ciardi;"Mark's Fingers" by Mary O'Neill. A whole unit based on one literature form, such as poetry,may evolve. Nursery rhymes, Biblical stories, Aesop's fables, process writing samples, jokes, advertisements like those utilized by Virginia Slims, and vocabulary words may all be used.

Guidelines should be given to learners prior to acting:

1) One should move slower than he would normally, so the audience does not miss a vital action.

2) The audience should be able to see clearly every movement. This prohibits turning one's back to the audience. Profile action is also difficult for beginners to master.

3) Body movement and facial expression should be exaggerated to avoid audience misinterpretation of an emotion. If showing surprise, one must

widen his eyes as well as open his mouth when he gasps; otherwise, he could appear to be yawning. Facial expression and gestures show the card dealer to be a slick gambler rather than a child at play.

Using a video-tape recorder (VTR) to film each pantomime provides the best evaluation for students. Not only can they see themselves and use the guidelines above to analyze their performance, they can also discuss one particular action. Comparisons between classes are enjoyed because they offer numerous interpretations of one character. Further, the instructor has the opportunity to point out specific strengths of acting and question aspects of performance. Thus the student can see what he has done to gain positive feedback.

The instructor's role in pantomime study is not to be dismissed lightly. It is one of the most vital aspects of a drama unit's success. Too often, we forget the instructor is an innovator and facilitator. While they learn from each other, our purpose is to expose students to new ideas and experiences. We then facilitate the students' manipulation of these ideas and experiences to create a learning situation. Mime diminshes the teacher's role as critic and holder of the right answer. One may participate in activities with students, but he must not become the expert for the class to imitate. The instructor must move around the room encouraging, cautioning against sloppy movements, and by his closeness, transmit his enthusiasm.

The study of pantomime is subjective. Perhaps that is the key to its popularity with children. They can enjoy it, learn skills needed in other areas of language arts and feel accomplishment in their ability to participate. Pantomime is not a panacea for all the problems of learning that children face, but it is a beginning. And that's all anyone needs to be successful.